2024 Mandate is loud: Prime Minister Modi listening?

www.newindian.in/2024-mandate-is-loud-prime-minister-modi-listening/

June 11, 2024

Summary

Now that the Modi government has put itself in the saddle again, with the help of the coalition partners of the NDA this time, it…

Now that the Modi government has put itself in the saddle again, with the help of the coalition partners of the NDA this time, it may seem ‘all is well that ends well’.

The opposition, INDI alliance, is gloating about how the Indian electorate brought Prime Minister Narendra Modi down from the high horse of having a majority of his own in Parliament. Likewise, following the smooth transition to its third term despite a reduced

majority, the BJP's debacle in the Lok Sabha elections and loss of face particularly in Uttar Pradesh is already behind them.

First, give credit where it is due—the opposition has indeed succeeded and has every reason to cheer. As I had analysed soon after the second phase of the elections,

> When the members of the Left-liberal intelligentsia, one after another, began doing 'wah Modi ji wah' in the last five years and intensified its flattery of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the last six months, it was clear that there is a shift in their political strategy.…
>
> — Aarti Tikoo Singh (@AartiTikoo) April 26, 2024

the Left-liberal intelligentsia's change of political strategy from abusing Prime Minister Modi in his first term to flatter him with dollops of cream in his second term, was effective. The Prime Minister ended up mollycoddling the Sangh Parivar's ideological opponents and yet, they did not turn up for him on the polling days. On the other hand, it also diluted the fervour among the party's own supporters.

Now, can the ruling party really afford to avoid introspection on why the Indian electorate denied a clear majority mandate to Prime Minister Narendra Modi? Doesn't the nation deserve to know why, ahead of the elections, the BJP facing double anti-incumbency, gave the slogan 'Ab ki bar 400 par'?

After all, the slogan only triggered the opposition to manufacture theories that the Indian democracy was under threat, that the government was planning to rig elections by tampering with EVMs and if re-elected to power with 400 seats in its third term, the Modi government was going to amend the Constitution to convert India into an autocratic state. In the end, the cascading effect of the slogan clearly helped the Congress party double its count (from 52 to 99 seats) in Parliament.

ALSO READ: Why Voters in South Kashmir are Happy to See Swarms of Tourists? | Aarti Tikoo's Report – THE NEW INDIAN

From the opposition's point of view in India, the 2024 Lok Sabha election mandate is a decisive vote against the BJP. But in real sense, the electorate's first choice remains the BJP—the single largest party with 240 seats in the 18th Lok Sabha. Compare this to the fact that since the 1991 parliamentary elections, the Congress party has never reached the halfway mark in Lok Sabha and never formed the government on its own strength.

After having been in power for the last ten years, the BJP-led NDA would face a stiff challenge from the opposition and anti-incumbency was a foregone conclusion in the 2024 parliamentary elections. But the BJP's slide is so sharp that not only did it fall short of a clear majority to form the government on its own, the figure along with its pre-poll allies did not even cross its own previous benchmark.

The steepness of the downward slope has occurred despite three biggest accomplishments of the Modi government in political, social, and economic spheres—fulfilment of the historical promise of abrogation of Article 370, building of Ram Mandir, and lifting millions of Labharthi Indians from poverty, pushing India to be the fifth largest economy of the world, reinvigoration of the economy following the Covid pandemic, and overall developmental work.

The third accomplishment with respect to the Indian economy was inevitable and can be attributed to all the Prime Ministers since Rajiv Gandhi who opened up the country economically. The nation's infrastructure, development, and leaps in science and space have been a persistent path followed by every leader and party that came to power in the last 75 years. Therefore, leaving aside the economic accomplishments, the other two achievements were so huge that the government had every right to blow its trumpet on both the issues. However, both were undermined.

The Modi ecosystem and the BJP, throughout the last five years, seemed to believe that it is invincible after such grand accomplishments. Its smug certitude prevented it from reflecting on where it was rickety and faltering. The government primarily remained focused on promoting the optics of the brand Modi while undermining the collective efforts of both the party and the Sangh, the party's ideological backbone and physical feet on the ground.

Both Article 370 and Ram Mandir had been Sangh's historical projects, which consumed generations of selfless karyakartas and even leaders like Shyama Prasad Mukherjee. Yet, the optics of Ram Mandir at Ayodhya were more about Prime Minister Narendra Modi than that of the icons of the Ayodhya movement and the battery of lawyers who fought the case for decades. Those who had given their political careers and lives to the movement were left behind, almost erasing the context from public memory. The result is that the issue failed to generate the public sentiment for such a significant event in the history of the Hindu civilization. What did affect the local voters emotionally the most was the massive corruption in the development of Ayodhya as a religious pilgrimage, with a huge number of the beneficiaries from outside the state.

ALSO READ: Kashmir votes for change this time, highest since 30 years – THE NEW INDIAN

Similarly, after nullifying Article 370—over which the Sangh and the BJP were in direct contestation with the Kashmiri Muslim political rulers for 70 years—Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited all the perpetrators of the conflict in Jammu & Kashmir—Farooq Abdullah, Mehbooba Mufti et al (who had been detained during the process of reorganization of Jammu & Kashmir into a union territory) to New Delhi for a handshake.

Soon after they were released and honored in New Delhi, a new round of targeted killings of Kashmiri Pandits, Sikhs, and SC and ST laborers from other states began in Kashmir. Through its ten years, the government remained completely apathetic towards displaced Kashmiri Hindus. There has been no outreach and no blueprint for their return and

rehabilitation in Kashmir. What's been brazenly insensitive is that neither Prime Minister Narendra Modi nor home minister Amit Shah bothered to meet them or visit the displaced Kashmiri Hindus languishing in the Jagti refugee camp in the Jammu region.

Capitulating to the perpetrators and indifference towards victims is never appreciated by the electorate that voted a leader or party to power for the purpose of delivering justice. Also, the drift from the ideological parent since the beginning of the second term of the Modi government and culminating with the BJP President claiming amidst the elections that the BJP no longer needs the RSS to win the polls, led to the party's disastrous debacle in Uttar Pradesh, especially Ayodhya, the symbol of cultural and civilizational heritage. It's imperative that the BJP recognizes that without its socio-cultural powerhouse, the RSS, it can never get a majority on its own, especially in swing states prone to divisions along caste and community.

Also, the Prime Minister and home minister need to acknowledge that the BJP has been destroyed in the last ten years by excessive centralization and disregarding party leaders and workers on the ground. Politically, Prime Minister Modi opened up a door for the erosion of the BJP and the Sangh's citadel built on certain fundamentals by sidelining many stalwarts of the party, empowering technocrats with no ideological commitment, and even strengthening losers and incompetent members of the party.

Even as no one can question Prime Minister Narendra Modi's immaculate record as far as corruption is concerned, voters did not buy that the BJP is corruption-free or that the government under Modi has become less corrupt. When common people have to pay for every small thing in government offices, it is obvious that voters have no reason to be impressed with the ED and CBI raids on the members of the opposition alone. The BJP's reputation and credibility were damaged at both national and regional levels, with several accusations of corruption. On top of that, embracing and rewarding tainted members of the opposition damaged the BJP even more.

Also, what was whispered, and not publicly raised, in the larger ecosystem of the BJP was the concern about the autocratic approach of the Prime Minister towards decision-making with regard to not just the big issues but also micro-management of small matters. Many also worried about the lack of interest in cultivating and promoting holistic talent, sensible voices, and promising leaders for the future.

One of the persistent features of Modi 2.0 was the constant attempts to seek validation from the opposition and their narrative-builders, in desperation. Overall, the Modi government did very little to understand the English-speaking youth and the fence-sitters among the voters, with its messaging propagated through IT cells, social media influencers, and media personnel. Instead, the narrative-building machinery was not just hugely ineffective in motivating them but also drove them away by their crassness, polarised rhetoric, and excessive theatrics and melodrama.

The resource-exhausting system used to build the Modi cult failed to assess the emotional intelligence of not just the urban English-speaking young voter but also the rural Hindi-speaking old voter. It assumed that the brand Modi showcasing the new Parliament, Ram Mandir, Lakshadweep beaches, or Jim Corbett Wildlife would be enough to enthuse both the modernist and the traditionalist. The electorate is least forgiving about the arrogance of such absolute power which is willing to compromise core ideological principles for the consolidation and retention of power.

The party needs to introspect on its excessive centralization, weakening of grassroots connection, and over-reliance on the Modi brand to carry it through elections. The Modi government must recognize the electorate's call for humility, inclusivity, and genuine commitment to both developmental and ideological promises. Only then can Modi 3.0 rise above the setbacks of the 2024 elections and work towards a more balanced and effective governance that aligns with the aspirations of all Indians.

What should be the roadmap ahead for the nation under Modi 3.0?

…to be continued.

Aarti Tikoo

With over two decades of work experience in the biggest media groups of India, she is one among India's most credible and fearless journalists. She has reported and written extensively on Kashmir, Pakistan's cross-border terrorism, geopolitics and international relations. As a founder of The New Indian, she has now the distinction of being the first woman entrepreneur in Indian national digital media, from Jammu & Kashmir.